■ by Gerald C. Nelson **In short**

Foreign aid and American universities: Time for a change

American universities are world-renowned for their research and synergy among teaching, research, and public service. These traits have been put to good use for development in the past. However, in recent years, universities have played a declining role in U.S. foreign assistance. The reasons for the decline arise both from within the universities themselves and from changing views about the role of foreign aid. The new administration is in the midst of a review of the role of foreign assistance. Now is the time to consider what role American universities can play in development efforts in the future.

Why the university contribution declined

In the 1960s when academic jobs were plentiful, resources were bountiful, and the economics of development attracted widespread interest, many universities made their faculty available for extended research, training, and institutional development efforts abroad. The best faculty members were eager to spend time overseas and devote their efforts to development issues. Many individuals who today are leading figures in development began their career with an extended (one to two year) experience in a foreign country on a university or quasi-university project.

Over time, the pressure to "publish or perish" increased as the growth in faculty numbers slowed. Devoting time and effort to research overseas became more costly to faculty members. The ratio of journal-quality articles to effort expended is lower for activities that involve overseas travel and learning about a new institutional environment. Junior faculty (those who do not have tenure) are actively discouraged from engaging in research that would involve any extended period overseas. The six-year window from employment to the tenure decision does not provide any room for an activity that needs added investment of time (in learning about a new country) and that might lead to no journal articles. As a consequence, it is difficult to find *any* young faculty who have spent extended professional time overseas as faculty members. The result is that while many aid dollars are still spent at American universities and on American faculty, the payoff has declined. However, there is a potential silver lining to this dark cloud. Pressure for change is making universities more open to new ideas than ever before.

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Forces for change

Today, American universities are under seige. Public confidence in, and support for, universities is at an all-time low as commentators like Alan Bloom decry the state of higher education. Financially-strapped state governments also see educa-

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tion as a major drain on funds and are allocating fewer dollars to higher education. Furthermore, they want more of the remaining dollars devoted to instruction and fewer to teaching foreign students or supporting research on foreign problems.

If the status quo is maintained, budget problems will reduce further universities' research contribution to development problems. They will also diminish the value of American education to foreign students, by encouraging the trend of viewing foreign students primarily as cash cows. Pressures for change, however, create an opportunity to forge a new role for universities in development.

An emerging consensus on foreign assistance

Any new role for American universities must be part of a larger redesign of foreign assistance. From my perspective, the emerging consensus has three elements. First, some continued aid is in the long-run interest of the U.S. Second, growth in federal funds available to help developing countries is unlikely. Finally, the U.S. aid program should take advantage of the unique resources available in the U.S.. The following list captures key areas where the U.S. has something special to offer and for which there is urgent need:

- human capital improvements
- family planning
- agricultural research support
- environmental protection and sustainable development
- institutional development for a market-friendly economy.

These five areas are inextricably intertwined. For example, slower population growth can mean less growth in the demand for food, less need for research to speed growth of the food supply, and less pressure to convert tropical forests to crop production. The right kinds of agricultural research can improve yields while minimizing the use of pesticides, reducing the environmental costs of increased food production. New market institutions that generate increased demand for labor and higher wages in the industrial sector reduce the pressure for people to migrate to the uplands to survive, and reduce pressure on tropical forests. Of these five areas, the first three have been given short shrift in U.S. foreign assistance in the last 10 years, and the fourth is only now beginning to attract substantial support.

Aside from new program directions, the administrative approach to foreign assistance needs to change. Solutions to development problems seldom come in five-year chunks, nor can they be addressed effectively with the use of consultants who make periodic short-term visits. Persons working on aid programs must have a long term perspective, from the vantage point of a developing country and must understand the benefits of working in cooperation with citizens of that country. It is in this context that I propose a new role for American universities.

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A new role for American universities

American universities can bring an understanding of the process of human capital development, a long-term perspective to development programs, and technical expertise to the five areas identified above. However, universities face many competing demands for their services. Furthermore, the incentives for faculty activity can differ quite dramatically from the desires of university administration. Any new program to use more effectively American universities for development must address three problems: (1) lack of incentives for faculty, and particularly junior faculty, to engage in research on development problems; (2) declining incentives for universities to deal with the unique issues associated with foreign students; (3) declining university resources in the face of increased domestic demands.

I propose the creation of a new partnership between the federal government and a few universities. This partnership would combine the

best features of programs such as the Agricultural Development Council, the Harvard International Institute of Development, and the AID joint career program.

A principal element in this new partnership would be the creation of new faculty positions, perhaps called "international professorships." An international professor would be hired by a university into a regular faculty position. A key element of this program is that international teaching, research and service would be central to promotion and tenure. Funding for these positions would be provided partly by the federal government out of aid funds. An international professor would have the following responsibilities:

(1) Research on problems of developing countries. This would include periodic stays of one to two years in a developing country. The first of the these would come early in the tenure process. These stays might be part of a development project, as a visiting professor in a foreign university, or as a staff person of a foreign government agency.

(2) Teaching at the home institution and at an international institution. One course would be on some aspect of developing country problems, but others would be part of the regular curriculum. This would enhance the professor's disciplinary expertise and bring international experience to the curriculum.

(3) Advising foreign students, including continued intellectual support upon return to their home institution.

(4) Public service in the U.S. and abroad. This might consist of work that addresses a development problem but does not qualify as publishable research, either because of the applied nature of the problem or confidentiality of the developing country sources.

Many public universities already have the administrative mechanisms in place that make such a program possible. Universities have developed procedures to delay the advance of the six-year tenure clock. Land-grant universities have long had procedures to evaluate the performance of and to grant tenure to faculty whose main activity is public service (typically known as extension faculty). Promotion could be based on meeting criteria more appropriate to someone whose program involved significant work outside his or her home institution (and country). Furthermore, the tenure clock could be slowed to reflect the fact that overseas work often involves delays outside the control of the individual.

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This program would have important benefits to U.S. education and research. It would allow American students more direct and frequent exposure to faculty with overseas experience. International professors would bring international examples to domestic courses, helping to internationalize the curriculum. And it would encourage synergy between research on problems at home and those abroad. Many universities would be receptive to this idea, and federal dollars could leverage added support from states and other sources.

The benefits to development are equally large. This proposal would foster long-term commitments by people and institutions with unique skills. It would help redirect the intellectual resources of American universities to development problems. Most importantly, it would make foreign assistance spent on LDC human capital improvements more productive.